



Rex Brynen

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"Understanding Hamas' Electoral Victory in Palestine: Causes and Consequences"

Tuesday, May 9, 2006
12 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120

This lecture is open to the public. Lunch will be served to invited students and faculty who RSVP to [Ann Powers](#) no later than Thursday, May 4, 2006.

Rex Brynen is Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Middle East Studies Program at McGill University. He has written extensively on the politics of Palestine and Jordan, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and authoritarianism and democratization in the Arab world. Forthcoming publications include *The Palestinians: Finding No Freedom in Liberation* and *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner) and *Palestinian Refugees: Challenges of Repatriation and Development* (London: I. B. Taurus).

One of the central goals of current U.S. foreign policy is to establish democracy in the Middle East. To do this, a central prerequisite is holding democratic elections in Middle Eastern countries. In one case, however, such elections have led to an outcome that shocked many in the West – the victory of Hamas in Palestine. How did an Islamist organization that the United States has branded as “terrorist” manage to win, and what are the implications of this development for the Arab-Israeli conflict and the greater Middle East region?

Rex Brynen, chair of the Middle East Studies Program at McGill University, argues that Hamas won an overwhelming victory in Palestine not because it ran on an Islamist platform, and perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, not because it was explicitly against the peace process with Israel. Rather, Hamas won in Palestine for two main reasons. First, it conducted an excellent electoral campaign with good organization, solid candidates, and clear message to the electorate. Second, it promised good and clean governance. Hence, Hamas' strength was its platform against corruption and for social welfare.

Relations with Israel, Brynen says, were not high on the priority list of Palestinian voters. Most were highly dissatisfied with the incompetence of Fatah, the secular nationalist organization that had long ruled Palestine. Fatah had come to be perceived as very corrupt, relying on patronage and failing to deliver to the people. Hamas, on the other hand, ran on the message that it possessed an ethics of clean governance, was resolved to fight corruption, and understood the importance of social welfare for ordinary Palestinians.

The scale of Hamas' victory in the Palestinian parliament surprised not only Western observers but Hamas itself. With its militantly anti-Israeli rhetoric, Hamas expected to do well enough in elections to put Fatah in a difficult position with regard to the peace process. But because Fatah ran an incompetent campaign, Hamas emerged with an absolute majority and suddenly had to assume governance. This meant not just running the Palestinian territories, but also figuring out how to deal with Israel.

Although Hamas won by a landslide, Brynen argues, this does not mean that Palestinian voters support an Islamist political and

social program. In fact, support for Hamas vacillates widely over time, and it does so inversely with the health of negotiations with Israel. At the height of the peace process, Hamas had the approval of just 9 percent of the electorate, in other words, only its core ideological support group. Most Palestinians, however, are floating voters whose opinions tend to change. As negotiations with Israel have ground to a halt, support for pro-peace process parties has declined precipitously not only in Palestine, but also Israel as well.

Events in the region since 2000 seem to have convinced people on both sides that resorting to force is the most effective way to deal with one another. The second Palestinian *intifada* and the unilateral actions by Israel in settling the final borders have strengthened more extremist forces. The election of Hamas government seems to have made chances for a peaceful resolution even slimmer. Instead of negotiations, a vicious cycle of Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli construction of the separation wall and restrictions on Palestinian mobility in the West Bank has set in.

In reaction to Israeli occupation, Hamas' message is more militant than Fatah's, and its avowed goal amounts to nothing less than destruction of Israel. However, it is noteworthy that the majority of Palestinians and even the majority of Hamas supporters are in favor of a two-state solution. In fact, its radical rhetoric notwithstanding, Hamas has mainly kept the ceasefire with Israel since it assumed the government. But its refusal to recognize Israel presents the Western policymakers with a basic dilemma in relations with the new Palestinian leadership: namely, how to deal with a legitimate democratic government that refuses to be part of the peace process.

Brynen argues that the West could take one of two possible approaches to the Hamas government: isolation or engagement. Americans and Europeans seem to have settled for different options. The United States refuses to deal with the Hamas government until Hamas explicitly recognizes the right of Israel to exist. Because Hamas refuses to do so, the United States has cut financial support to Palestine and opted to exert financial and political pressure to bring down the current Palestinian government. Europeans, on the other hand, are in favor of engaging Hamas and talking with the democratically elected government in order to induce it to modify and moderate its position on Israel.

Brynen thinks that either approach could work in convincing Hamas to moderate its views and participate in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But neither is likely to work if they are applied only half way. Perhaps more important, attempting to bring down the Hamas government cannot be done overtly. The United States might secretly inform the Palestinian government that it will cut all ties and support if Hamas continues to adhere to its radical position. But Americans should never explicitly announce that Hamas ought to be brought down, not least because this would hurt the greater goal of democratizing the Arab world. The United States cannot claim to support democratization and then openly undermine a democratically elected government.

Whatever path is chosen, Brynen said, a solution to the current fiscal crisis of Palestinian territories must be found soon. The economic situation in Palestine is getting worse by the day, and according to the World Bank, unemployment, poverty, and malnourishment is increasing to critical levels as Israel blocks Palestinian trade and transfer of goods and withholds its tax money. If the West continues to refuse to provide aid to Palestine, the crisis will be disastrous in the Palestinian territories, and the ensuing breakdown of law and order will affect Israel adversely as well.